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ABSTRACT

This study explores the possible impact of school (especially of changes in school setting) upon self-concept. During the spring of 1974 questionnaires were obtained from 181 ninth graders at Burton Junior High School and Central High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The following fall, those of the same groups who could be found in the tenth grade at Central High were given a follow-up questionnaire. This repetition of similar questionnaires allows the author to analyze change from one school year to the next. The study provides no significant change in general patterns of self-concept which can be considered a result of entering high school. (Author)

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A STUDY OF SELF-CONCEPTIONS

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PREFACE

The present study explores certain aspects of self-conceptions of selected groups of ninth and tenth grade students of the Grand Rapids Public Schools.

During the spring of 1974 questionnaire materials were obtained from 181 ninth graders at Burton Junior High and Central High School. The following fall those of the same groups who could be found in the tenth grade at Central High were given a follow-up questionnaire. This repetition of similar questionnaires allows us to analyze change from one school year to the next. A special question of interest to us was whether those who changed schools during this period showed a greater change in self-conceptions than those remaining at the same school.

We are, of course, especially indebted to the students who took part in this study. Special help was also provided by officials of the Grand Rapids Public Schools (especially Don Duiven of Burton Junior High and Wesley Perrin, Edwin Ives and Edmund Galant of Central High) and by the Grand Rapids Public Schools - Western Michigan University Center for Educational Studies, which provided partial support for the study. Persons who assisted in data collection and processing for this study were Susan Aalsburg, Barbara Kosnik, Patricia Fisher, Elise Brandi, Donna Grant, Sue Gezon, Penne Collins, Dylan Dizon, and Richard Ropers.

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WHY THIS STUDY?

This study was planned with two main objectives in mind.

One central objective of this study was to explore the possible impact of school (especially of changes in school setting) upon self-conceptions. In particular, we wanted to see whether the change in school setting as students moved from junior high to senior high was associated with significant changes in self conceptions. If such changes are in fact observed, it would be important for school administrators, teachers, and counselors to take note of them in considering the possible effects of their programs. It would also be important for psychologists and social scientists to consider why such changes may occur.

A second key objective of the present study was more methodological than substantive. It was hoped that this research would provide an opportunity to develop better techniques for measuring certain aspects of self-conceptions. A particular objective in this regard was to refine an instrument proposed by Gergen and Morse (1967) to measure consistency of self conceptualizations.

Another purpose of this study was to obtain comparative data for cross-cultural analysis. Similar data to those collected in Grand Rapids were also obtained in Karachi, Pakistan. Although analysis of cross-cultural findings will not be included in this report, it may be understood as part of the purpose of this study.

The present report will not emphasize the methodological and cross-cultural aspects of our study. Methodological concerns will be discussed only to the extent necessary to set forth the nature of the data gathered and their possible implications. Foreign data are not yet available for cross-cultural analysis. Indications of the possible impact of changes in school setting, rather than methodological or cross-cultural considerations, are therefore the primary focus of this report.

SCHOOL AND SELF-ESTEEM

A number of studies have shown that experiences in school may have a significant effect on particular aspects of self conceptions. Few studies, however, have shown a marked impact of school setting upon general self conceptions. For example, extensive researches by Morris Rosenberg (1965) and Stanley Coopersmith (1967) have identified numerous factors in self-esteem of young people; but school setting is not one of the factors included. Both Rosenberg and Coopersmith emphasize features of family structure and parental treatment in their analyses. For example, we may note Coopersmith's most general summary of his findings:

> The most general statements about the antecedents of self-esteem can be given in terms of three conditions: total or nearly total acceptance of the children by their parents, clearly defined and enforced limits, and the respect and latitude for individual action that exist within the defined limits. In effect, we can conclude that the parents of children with high self-esteem are concerned and attentive toward their children, that they structure the worlds of their children along lines they believe to be proper and appropriate, and that they permit relatively great freedom within the structures they have established. Examination of this combination of conditions reveals some general relationships between childrearing practices and the formation of self-esteem. The most notable of these deal with parental behavior and the consequences of the rules and regulations that parents establish for their children. These relationships indicate that definite and enforced limits are associated with high rather than low self-esteem; that families which establish and maintain clearly defined limits permit greater rather than less deviation from conventional behavior, and freer individual expression, than do families without such limits; that families which maintain clear limits utilize less drastic forms of punishment; and that the families of children with high self-esteem exert greater demands for academic performance and excellence. Taken together, these relationships indicate that, other things being equal, limits and rules are likely to have enhancing and facilitating effects and that parental performance within such limits is likely to be moderate, tolerant, and generally civilized. They suggest that parents who have definite values, who have a clear idea of what they regard as appropriate behavior, and who are able and willing to present and enforce their beliefs are more likely to rear children who value themselves highly. Parents who can act this way apparently have less need to treat their children harshly, and, from all indications, are viewed with greater affection and respect by their offspring (Coopersmith, 1967, p. 236).

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Although the general ideas brought out by such a study as Coopersmith's may be applied to teachers as well as to parents, school factors as such were simply not included in the data.

Recently, however, Simmons and associates (1973) have presented data suggesting an important relationship between school and self-concept. Using measures of four different aspects of self conceptions (self-consciousness, stability of self, self-esteem, and self as perceived by significant others), these authors gathered questionnaire data from 1,917 children of the public schools of Baltimore, grades 3 through 12. Over-all patterns in results are associated with age levels as follows:

> In contrast to younger children, the early adolescents (twelve to fourteen year olds) show a higher level of self-consciousness, greater instability of self-image, slightly lower global self-esteem, lower specific self-esteem, and a more negative "perceived self" (that is, they are less likely to think that parents, teachers, and peers of the same sex view them favorably). The assumption that such changes are likely to be disturbing is consistent with the fact that early adolescents also show a higher level of depressive affect than do the younger children. The only area showing improvement in early adolescence involves the opposite sex: children see themselves as better liked by the opposite sex as they grow older.
>
> While the early adolescents are more self-conscious and have a more unstable self-image, this self-conschiousness appears to decline somewhat in later adolescence and the self-image becomes somewhat more stable. However, even in late adolescence, the subjects manifest greater self-consciousness and instability than do the eight to eleven year old children. (Simmons, Rosenberg and Rosenberg, 1973, p. 556).

In trying to locate more specifically this age-related shift in self-conceptions, Simmons and associates find an especially sharp shift between ages 11 and 12. Further analysis of their data suggests that the age difference itself is not as important as another factor: the entry into junior high school. The onset of a more disturbed self-image seems markedly associated with this transition from elementary school to junior high.

Sirmons and associates did not find a corresponding shift in self conceptions to mark the transition from junior high to senior high school. However, it should be noted that they used only cross-sectional data. They did not follow the same individuals to question them both before and after the shift to the new school.

AN EXPLORATION

The present exploratory study was planned before the appearance of the article by Simmons and associates, and it was therefore not designed to relate specifically to that study. Nevertheless, the Simmons study raises several questions which the present study was designed to answer, in particular: If we follow the same individuals through the transition from junior high to senior high school, would we find a significant change in self conceptions? Perhaps a change which doesn't show in cross-sectional data might appear if the same individuals are followed through this transition.

Of course the scope of the present study was far less ambitious than that of Simmons and associates. A total of 181 respondents were included in the present study to begin with, and of these only 80 were successfully followed up eight months later.

In March of 1973, 97 ninth graders of Burton High School filled out our questionnaires. The intention was to follow up with all of these students the following fall when they would be sophomores at Central High School.

As a comparison group, 84 ninth graders of Central High School also filled out the same questionnaire in March, 1973. A follow-up for these individuals was also attempted in the fall. These students were selected as a comparison group because they would be of the same age and level as the Burton group, but they would not be changing schools. Because they had attended a middle school rather than a junior high, they were already in Central High for their ninth grade level.

A total of 43 students from Burton and 37 from the Central comparison group were available for both spring and fall administrations of the questionnaire. Results reported below will be based on these 80 individuals, except where otherwise indicated.

MEASURING SELF-CONCEPTIONS

The questionnaire* developed for this study consisted of four main parts: (1) a set of about 20 social background items; (2) five sets of semantic differential scales, with each set including 12 items; (3) a modified form of the Gergen-Morse (1967) measure of self consistency; and (4) a final set of about 15 questions dealing with various aspects of self-conceptions. From these questionnaire materials, five main measures of self-conceptions were obtained, as follows:

A. Semantic Differential Self Ratings.

The respondent was asked to rate himself on a 6 point scale for each of the following pairs of opposed items:

(1) Outgoing -- Shy

(2) Self-Centered -- Unselfish

(3) Rarely Angry -- Often Angry

(4) Optimistic -- Pessimistic

(5) Irresponsible -- Responsible

(6) Traditional -- Modern

(7) Entertaining -- Boring

(8) Lazy -- Hard Working

(9) Practical -- Idealistic

(10) Relaxed -- Tense

(11) Let others know me -- Keep myself secret

(12) Not very intelligent -- Very intelligent

---

*A copy of the complete questionnaire may be obtained by those interested from the Center for Educational Studies, 110 Ionia Street, N. W., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49502.

B. Self-Other Discrepancy Scores

Each individual also indicated for each of the above pairs of items how he thought he would be seen by (1) friends of the same sex, (2) friends of the opposite sex, (3) his parents, and (4) his teachers. From each of these ratings was derived a score to represent the summated discrepancy from the individual's own self ratings.

C. Self Consistency Score

Each respondent selected three adjectives from a list of 14 positive adjectives to describe himself. He also selected three adjectives from a list of 14 more negative adjectives. Then he made a rating of the congruity or consistency of each possible pair combination from among the six adjectives chosen. The self consistency score was obtained by the sum of all pair combination ratings.

D. Self-Esteem Score

Among the various questions in the final section of the questionnaire were four derived from Rosenberg's (1965) measure of self-esteem. A rough self-esteem measure was obtained by counting the number of these items (out of four) in which the respondent indicated high self-esteem.

E. Self-Stability Score

Among the various questions in the final section of the questionnaire were also two derived from Rosenberg's (1965) measure of self-stability. A rough self-stability score was obtained by counting the number of these items (out of two) in which the respondent indicated high self-stability.

RESULTS

Given the amount of data collected, a great variety of results could be tabulated and reported. However, given the more specific focus of the present study upon effects of the entry into high school upon self-conceptions, a fairly simple summary of selected results is possible.

The simplest way to deal with the question of effects of entry into high school upon self-conceptions is to compare the patterns of change of those who entered the new school (Burton in spring to Central in fall) with those of the same grade level who did not change schools (being in Central both spring and fall). This analysis was done in terms of frequencies of students (who either changed in one direction, in the other direction, or showed no change) tabulated separately for various dependent variables. An Appendix gives the basic data from which such comparisons can be made.

The frequencies of change of the Burton-originating group were compared to those of the Central-originating group for each of the 19 variables indicated in the appendix. This was done by performing chi-square tests for each of 19 comparisons (Burton vs. Central). The results can be very briefly indicated: there were no significant differences (at the .05 level of significance) between Burton and Central change patterns for any of the 12 semantic differential variables, for any of the four discrepancy scores, for the measure of self consistency, for the self-esteem score, or for the self stability score.

It is true that some of the differences approached statistical significance. Most notably was this the case for self-teacher discrepancy, self-esteem, and self stability. As can be observed from the frequencies included in the appendix, Burton-originating students were more likely than Central students to show an increase in self-teacher discrepancy and show

an increase in self stability. These trends, however, were not strong enough, given our limited sample size that we can consider them reasonably reliable findings.

In brief, the present study provides no clear-cut evidence that students who move from junior high school to high school exhibit different patterns of self-concept change from students at the same grade level who have not changed schools. If any such general change exists, our study was unable to measure it.

The above results all are based on a comparison of change frequencies of Burton and Central sub-samples. However, another question might be asked regarding change in self-conceptions. Did the sample as a whole (including Burton and Central groups) change in self conceptions from the spring to the fall? That is, was there any over-all pattern of change which applied to the total group of students involved (regardless of whether they changed schools or not)?

To answer this question, a sign test)comparing the frequencies of positive change to those of negative change) was performed for each of the 19 variables indicated in the Appendix. Of these 19 tests, three indicated statistical significance (at the .05 level) and one other approached statistical significance ($p < .10$). These were the following:

(1) students saw themselves as significantly less "responsible" in the fall than in the spring in semantic differential self ratings ($p < .05$);

(2) students saw themselves as significantly less "modern" (and more "traditional") in the fall than the spring in semantic differential self ratings ($p < .05$);

(3) students saw a significant decrease in discrepancy between self ratings and their perception of how teachers viewed them from the spring to

the fall ($p < .0001$);

(4) there was some tendency for self consistency to be higher in the fall ($p < .10$).

These results apply to the total set of respondents as a whole, without distinguishing Burton and Central sub-groups. However, inspection of the frequencies contained in the appendix indicates that the decreased self-teacher discrepancy tended to be stronger among Central than Burton students, as was the tendency toward increased self-consistency. But these differences between sub-groups are of doubtful reliability and, at any rate, do not produce any reversal of the pattern for the entire sample. The four findings enumerated above must therefore be understood as applying to the total set of respondents. They reflect general tendencies of change from spring to fall and do not differentiate those changing schools from those who did not.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study provides no significant change in general patterns of self-conceptions which can be considered a result of entering high school.

One possible explanation for this lack of significant patterns might be that our measuring instruments are lacking in sufficient reliability or validity to detect some important changes. This may well be the case. We did not use instruments in a form which had previously been validated for a large population of adolescents. We used our own adaptations of instruments developed by others. We can at this time offer no statistical evidence on the reliability and validity of our instruments for the form in which they were used. One by-product of this study is to gather data which might bear on the reliability and validity of our measures; however, this methodological work has not yet been completed, and when completed it is not likely to suggest anything other than that our measures are very rough approaches to the aspects of self-conceptions which they purport to tap.

However, we need not assume that our measures are completely inadequate to register changes in self conceptions. We have noted that they did in fact register certain such changes for the total set of respondents (without discriminating whether individuals changed schools). Although these do not seem to fit into any single over-all pattern, the strongest pattern is of at least some interest: students felt their teachers understood them much better in the fall than the spring. The finding is sufficiently marked that one should be skeptical of this as an index of actual teacher empathy toward students. Perhaps more likely this simply indicates a better pattern of

morale for students early in the school year than when the year is moving toward its close.

But these are secondary themes. Our main theme is the absence of significant changes associated with the specific factor of entry into high school. This, of course, is in harmony with the findings of Simmons and associates, who (though using somewhat different procedures) found significant changes with entry into junior high but not with entry into senior high school. Perhaps entering high school just isn't such an important event as we thought it might be -- so far as changes in self-conceptions are concerned.

The present study has been a small step in the direction of needed longitudinal research to examine how self-conceptions may change over time. The time period included in our study was only about six months. A much longer period would be necessary to examine the significant changes in self-conceptions as young people become young adults. This process needs much more systematic research than it has received so far. The present study covers one step in the process -- passage from the ninth to the tenth grade -- of selected students in one Midwestern school system.

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APPENDIX

Patterns of Change (From Spring to Fall) of Respondents on Self-Concept Variables: Frequencies of Respondents Showing Higher Scores, Lower Scores, or No Difference

Variable	Burton Group			Central Group		
	Higher In Fall	Lower In Fall	No Difference	Higher In Fall	Lower In Fall	No Difference
A. Semantic Differential						
(1) Shy	15	13	15	6	9	22
(2) Unselfish	10	15	16	14	12	10
(3) Often Angry	13	10	18	9	10	19
(4) Pessimistic	13	9	16	11	14	10
(5) Responsible	8	18	15	8	13	16
(6) Modern	10	19	12	6	16	13
(7) Boring	11	10	19	12	5	19
(8) Hard Working	14	10	14	7	14	15
(9) Idealistic	9	13	18	13	13	11
(10) Tense	12	11	16	10	10	16
(11) Keep Self Secret	15	10	16	10	10	17
(12) Intelligent	13	15	13	15	8	14
B. Self-Other Discrepancy						
(1) Friends of Same Sex	21	19	1	15	17	1
(2) Friends of Opposite Sex	17	21	2	21	15	0
(3) Parents	17	16	5	20	14	0
(4) Teachers	15	21	1	7	22	3
C. Self Consistency	22	18	2	21	10	1
D. Self Esteem	16	8	19	8	13	16
E. Self Stability	6	18	19	12	19	11

NOTE: Not all the above rows have a total frequency of 80. Because of incomplete data, some cases had to be dropped from part of the analysis.